

# THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA REGISTER

## Irvine Adult School switches from free to fee

By [TERYL ZARNOW](#)

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**IRVINE** - My grandmother, with an intuitive grasp of free market economics, warned me against rascalion high school boys: Why would a boy buy the cow if he could get the milk for free?

The answer to that question concerns more than dairy farmers. Newspapers – an offhand example – are pondering whether readers will pay for Internet content they have been getting for free.

The Irvine Adult School is another example.

For 35 years, the [Irvine Adult School](#) has provided valuable, wonderful classes to the public. In the past, the state funded most of these classes such as English as a Second Language (ESL), computer skills, or teacher aide certification. For students, the classes were pretty much free.

In 2009, California cut the strings to education funding that included the Adult School's \$1 million-plus budget. Districts were allowed to decide how to spend their money and many, including Irvine, used that money to fund K-12 classes instead.

"It was a tough decision for the district," says Karen Bautista, administrator of the Irvine Adult School that, last year, served 5,200 students. "They understood the value of adult education, but they were talking about laying off teachers and creating larger class sizes."

In June, the [Irvine Unified School District](#) eliminated funding for adult education. When the semester ended in June, school was slated to end as well.

Instead, the Irvine Adult School stuck around. School leaders are gambling that students will pay for classes that were once free. The former nonprofit has one year to make itself self-sufficient.

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The caring and mutual respect between Adult School students and teachers is obvious.

In Room 1, Jackie Malec is teaching how to become a teacher's aide. She and her students discuss how an aide might notice a pattern in a student's behavior, and its causes.

That's the lesson, but the learning includes much more.

Students come from places like Korea, China, Iran and Pakistan as well as Irvine. Some want jobs; others want to better understand the U.S. school system their children attend. At the last class, each student makes a presentation. Topics have included Indian dancing, yoga or making sushi.

"It's not just what you learn in a book. It's about building relationships," recalls Danielle Russell, who took the class last year. "I would have paid \$200 it was so much fun."

Next door, Barbara Goward is teaching English as a Second Language writing on computers. Her students include wives whose husbands were transferred here from around the world on business, and families of visiting professors.

"They work hard and are very critical of themselves. If they can't say it perfectly, they don't want to say it at all. They need to gain some confidence..."

Teachers work to make classes meaningful to students' lives. When students asked how to use mass transit, teachers built lessons plans around schedules and routes.

Students praise their teachers and the school as the perfect introduction to America.

"When you change countries you feel uncomfortable. This is a good way to adopt to the U.S.A.," says Olga Smetannikova, who came from Russia with her husband.

For this, they are willing to pay.

"If everything is free, it seems easy. You don't pay attention. When you pay, you pay attention," says Lili Nabili, originally from Persia.

Piernicola Cocchiario and his wife moved to Irvine a year ago from Italy to be near their son. The father didn't know any English.

"I was very surprised school was free – a gift of the government," he says. "It was too free."

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After 14 years at the Irvine Adult School, Karen Bautista is confident as an administrator. Now, she's using other skills.

"Needing to run a business is such a learning experience."

Irvine agreed to let the school spend its \$200,000 budget reserve this year. Next year, they will have to rely entirely on their income.

The school made painful budget cuts: An office position, office hours, the length of classes; even the \$10,000 lease for the copying machine.

The decision to save the school was made quickly, with no time to mail out the usual class brochure. Internet registration enrolled 800 students instead of the normal 1,600. The result is fewer classes. When school restarted in September, it had 18 teachers instead of 30. Those who stayed were willing to reduce their load in exchange for the future.

The school had to set prices: A once-a-week class for 90 minutes is \$80. A twice-a-week class for four hours is \$120.

"We learned there is a price point. We learned that charging \$140 for computer classes did not go, but they love \$80 for a one-day class."

The school hopes to find a marketing intern willing to work for free, but for now Bautista has the job. When a caller recently complained that prices were too high, Irvine Valley College was cheaper, Bautista was quick to disagree: Irvine Adult School has free parking, no health fee, and no residency requirements.

The school has ambitious plans. Without state funding, there are no restrictions on classes they can offer. Plans include an ESL book club, an ESL job hunting class, and a class on American culture.

"I can increase fees or double the volume," Bautista explains. "Now I want to double the volume."

She expects to turn a \$160,000 profit this year.

Before, if a class was unsuccessful, students wouldn't come. Now, if it's unsuccessful, they won't pay.

Significantly, attendance this year is higher.

"Unfortunately, there are people who don't value something for free. School always had value, but maybe now they are seeing the value ... People value what they pay for."

Enrollment this session remains open at the Irvine Adult School at Creekside Education Center. The new session starts Jan. 25. Information: [www.irvineadultschool.com](http://www.irvineadultschool.com)

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